



UKNDA COMMENTARY

UK NATIONAL DEFENCE ASSOCIATION

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THE DEFENCE BUDGET LEAGUE TABLES

False Comfort from Statistics

By **Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon**
and **Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham**

A UKNDA COMMENTARY

Introduction

This is the second UKNDA Commentary. As we said in our first Commentary, ‘Deterrence is not just about nuclear weapons’, the essence of deterrence theory is that it should be consistently clear to potential opponents what our stance is and to what we will certainly react, and that we demonstrably have the capability and determination to react effectively to aggression and violations of the UN Charter, and deal with the consequences. In other words, we should have the military strength to match our strategic policy stance. It is the certainty of response that gives deterrence of all sorts real bite. The present situation in Syria has an irony in that if our strategic policy had been clear before the event, and if our ability and willingness to underwrite that policy had been evident, then Assad might well have hesitated before using chemical weapons. In this light, we might contemplate the weaknesses in our conventional military capabilities and consider what potential enemies could derive from this situation.

This paper suggests that rather than using selective statistics to justify to the British public the major cuts to defence, politicians should focus on the security weaknesses confronting the nation and the message this sends to allies and enemies alike.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'John Muxworthy'.

Cdr John Muxworthy RN
CEO UKNDA

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Politicians like sound bites; this government is no exception. In response to criticism of cuts to defence, the government has consistently asserted that the UK has the fourth largest defence budget in the world. This is a statistic beloved by Ministers and echoed by faithful MPs as if, in itself, it justifies the savage cuts of recent years which have left the United Kingdom bereft of key capabilities such as Maritime Patrol Aircraft, Theatre Missile Defence and Carrier-based Air, cuts that have reduced our armed forces personnel and equipment to the lowest levels in living memory.

A moment's thought would soon reveal how shallow this sound bite really is.

What matters is not what you spend but what you get for the money; the output not the input. The key issue is whether our capabilities are real, sustainable and adequate for the threats we may have to face now and in the future. Even the most cursory examination of the facts, in such as the IISS publication *The Military Balance*, will show that we are a long way from having the fourth largest or most capable armed forces in the world. Our personnel numbers, for example, including all our Reserves, place us in 31st position, behind even Spain and Argentina. Experienced, skilful and battle hardened we may be, but we are just too few – too few in personnel, ships, aircraft and weapons.

Selective Statistics

It seems that only certain league tables are appealing to the political mind. Tony Blair was vocal on the need to raise spending on the NHS to the average in Europe; it was perhaps a worthy ambition recognising that the NHS was not fully meeting the national need. But, as any businessman would know, just spending money without a very clear vision of the necessary output or any strategy to achieve it brings no guarantee of success. Look at the 60% increase in health spending in the ten year period from 2000 and ask whether by any measure we have produced the desired outcome.

Now the *Sun* newspaper¹ has blown the gaff on the sound bite. It highlights that we are not 4th but 5th in the spending league. But, by 2017 we will be 6th and are very likely to fall still further in the years to come. Most recently, the newspaper has also highlighted the major undermanning of Army front line units which must surely pose serious questions on retention, redundancy and recruitment.

But whether we are fourth, or sixth, is surely not the point. What the tables do reveal so clearly is that there are a number of countries, particularly those which are located in the more unstable but strategically critical areas of the world, who are increasing their defence budgets – Russia, China, India, Japan, Brazil, the Gulf States, to name just a few. Why then is it that these countries have so different a view of the world from the UK? In short, **why are they re-arming while we are disarming?** Any objective analysis of the situation would reveal that the changing league table positions arise from the strategic ambitions of Russia, China, Japan and India, whilst our relegation arises from a series of defence cuts which have little to do with strategy and everything to do with short term fiscal priorities.

So we have to ask, in a complicated world, does strategy matter? Or does the Government think that our interests are best served by off-the-cuff pragmatic reaction and decision-making only?

¹ The Sun Newspaper, 10 Jul 2013, *Flop guns*, by David Willetts, Deputy Defence Editor.

Well, history strongly suggests otherwise. Previous UKNDA papers have highlighted the incoherence of a number of decisions made in recent years, many of which will have long term consequences for the security and well being of the nation. Our nuclear deterrent for example, which we fully support, has had its credibility undermined by weaknesses in conventional capabilities². Such conventional weakness is highly dangerous. When considering lack of personnel, think Basra, think Helmand. And do not be fooled by our much trumpeted success in Libya; the United States provided 70% of the support air sorties plus most of the critical Day One air attacks. If an attack is launched on Syria, take note of who is doing the heavy lifting; it will not be us even if by then we have rejoined the Coalition of the Willing. Anyway, how can we react pragmatically unless we already have some benchmark to decide what forces to provide ourselves with – in a word, strategy.

Strategy is not prescriptive; rather it provides vision and direction; it focuses ambition. All involved in the promotion of a nation's well being and success need an understanding of its strategy. Russia, China, India, and Japan have national strategies widely understood within their borders and evident to the outside world too. In every case, this has been reflected in the commitment, strength and make-up of the nation's armed forces.

For the United Kingdom, the rudderless slide down the tables places our standing in the world at risk. However rich, however well intentioned we may be, a nation whose armed forces are perceived as weak and unable in a crisis to support their national aspiration, does not, and cannot, carry real conviction in the world in which we live. What message does it send to allies, and what comfort does it bring to potential enemies? There is a timeless truth to Andrew Roberts' comment in his foreword to the UKNDA paper on 'A National Debate on Defence'³:

“It seems astonishing that politicians themselves should not want a stronger military, as that and only that gives them a voice worth listening to in the councils of the world.”

We should therefore thank the media for shining a light on the strategic vacuum in UK defence policy, a point made in the past by several commentators including the then Chief of Defence Staff in 2010. And the reality of the figures puts a large spoke in the wheel of Government rhetoric.

Where Next?

What will politicians say now with an election on the horizon? We can expect to be reminded of the problem of fiscal debt, and that defence should play its role in reducing it. But defence already has. Since 1989, and in marked contrast to health and welfare, the core defence budget has halved its share of the GDP, from over 4% to about 2% – a saving of around £30 billion a year. Over the same period, in real terms, the health budget has increased by a factor of 3 and the Welfare budget by a factor of 2. Can it really be the case that our health and welfare in 1989 were so poor that such an increase can still be justified when, on the government's own admission, this level of public expenditure is now wholly unaffordable? It is a striking observation that a reduction of just 1% in the combined Health and Welfare budgets would fund a 10% increase in defence, but even then still leaving defence well below its levels of 1989. Of course health is an important priority but getting the balance right between a nation's health and its security is vital.

² *Deterrence Is Not Just About Nuclear Weapons – Time for serious strategic thought*, Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, UKNDA Paper, Aug 2013.

³ *A National Debate on Defence – A Dire Necessity*, by ACM Sir Michael Graydon et al, UKNDA, 17 Sep 2012.

So, if relatively we were spending too much on defence then surely we would be ranked high in any Global Militarisation Index? Not so. A recent German assessment, seeking to highlight pronounced military spending⁴, comparing a variety of indicators such as GDP, health expenditure, and weapons to population, shows that Israel and Singapore lead in terms of serious militarisation, while the UK, in contrast, is down at 64th position – below Sweden and France and alongside even neutral Switzerland. Now that is a statistic to inform the nation.

We can accept our fall if we wish, but there is a further arguably more dangerous consequence to the present state of the armed forces. Because major equipment inevitably takes a long time to design and build, modern wars are always fought with the equipment, support and human resources which have been invested over the preceding decade or so. This gives today's policy makers a great responsibility. The decisions made today will affect the capability of our Services in 10-20 years time, in a world that is likely to be quite different from ours. A review of the past 50 years will show that nearly all the wars surprised us and we have never been able successfully to predict the nature of geostrategic balance ten years ahead. We are not at the end of history and thus have an obligation to future generations. Our current failure to invest for an unknown future, and sustain the capacity to meet it, may leave our own children and grandchildren unprepared and with insufficient time to strengthen our military capability. Should that happen, neither history nor our children would ever forgive today's political leaders.

So, the tables have introduced many more questions than just our place in the spending league. Have we abandoned strategic thought for short term political expediency? Why is it that in 2012 France, spending some \$11bn less than us on defence, can field 24 Principal Surface Combatant (PSC) ships to our 19 in a navy with a comparable range of capabilities, and 15 Squadrons of combat aircraft to our 9. Or Russia, who even when spending a similar figure to our own, fielded over 1300 of the most modern Main Battle tanks to our 227, 33 PSCs and over 70 Air Squadrons. And even Italy, spending less than half of what we spend on defence, has 18 PSCs and 10 Squadrons of combat aircraft⁵.

How does all this affect our much vaunted permanent place on the UN Security Council?

We have answered the matter of strategic direction; there is none. We will address the other questions in a later paper; there is much to say and much political fog to disperse.

For now, take note of our descent in the league tables but, more importantly, do not ever again be taken in by the politicians' chant that all is well with the defence of the United Kingdom simply because we are the 4th largest spender in the world.

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⁴ Bonn International Center for Conversion, funded by German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, <http://www.bicc.de/program-areas/project/project/global-militarization-index-gmi-43/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_Global_Militarization_Index.

⁵ IISS Military Balance, 2013.



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